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The Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts: A Survey

By Barry L. Blackburn

The eighteenth-century biblical scholar J. A. Bengel was on to something when he suggested that the Acts of the Apostles would have been more appropriately entitled “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.”¹ “The Holy Spirit” or some similar designation for God’s Spirit occurs some fifty-six times in Acts.² But Luke hardly overlooked the work of the Spirit in his “former treatise.” In the Gospel of Luke, references to the Holy Spirit number approximately seventeen.

In the story of Christian beginnings comprised by Luke-Acts, God is at work in the lives of persons through whom He will provide for the salvation of all the earth. One of the most important means by which God leads, guides, and empowers his agents is the Holy Spirit. Thus Luke’s story presupposes the truth of Jeremiah 10:23: “[T]he way of man is not in himself, . . . it is not in man who walks to direct his steps” (RSV).³ In Luke-Acts, God adopts a very “hands-on” approach as he pursues and advances his redemptive plan.

The activity of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts assumes three distinct stages: the period of preparation for Jesus’ ministry (Luke 1:1–3:20); Jesus’ ministry (Luke 3:21–Acts 1:26); and the period of the church (Acts 2:1–28:31). The activity of the Spirit links each stage with the other two, and the three stages together continue the story of God’s Spirit begun in the Old Testament. On the other hand, each stage, while building on the former, tells of a new and distinctive chapter in the Spirit’s work.

Stage One

To prepare the way for Jesus’ mission, the Spirit works through several people, especially prophets. Even from his mother’s womb, John the Baptist will be endowed with the Holy Spirit, enabling him to execute his prophetic mission of preparing Israel for the Lord (Luke 1:15, 17). The creative power of the Spirit causes the virgin Mary to conceive Jesus (Luke 1:35). Subsequently, the Spirit transforms Elizabeth, the Baptist’s mother, into a prophet who miraculously recognizes that Mary is pregnant with her Lord, the Messiah (Luke 1:41–45). When the Baptist is born, the Spirit transforms Zechariah from a mute into an exuberant prophet who announces the unique prophetic status of his son, who will prepare Israel for her Messianic Lord (Luke 1:67–79). Shortly after the Christ child is born, the Spirit enables the prophets Simeon and Anna to recognize the Messianic identity of Jesus (Luke 2:25–38). Immediately, these two prophets proclaim to bystanders that God’s long-announced salvation of Israel and the Gentiles will be accomplished through this child (Luke 2:29–32, 38). Simeon, moreover, intimates Jesus’, and therefore Mary’s, passion.

Luke’s last reference to the Holy Spirit prior to the ministry of Jesus prepares for the work of the Spirit in both the ministry of Jesus and the life of the church. The Baptist declares, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). Jesus’ power to baptize with the Holy Spirit, which anticipates Pentecost and beyond, presupposes that God will anoint Jesus him-

There is no hope, however, for those who steadfastly reject the words of the Holy Spirit spoken through the church, particularly its leaders.

self with the Spirit. The Baptist's prophecy, therefore, serves as an effective transition to the second and third stages of Luke's account of the Spirit's activity.

Stage Two

The mission of Jesus begins when God anoints Jesus with the Holy Spirit on the occasion of his baptism. The descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove thus makes Jesus God's Messiah, that is, God's anointed king and savior (Luke 3:22; 4:18; Acts 10:38). Whereas Israel's ancient kings were anointed with oil, the "anointed one" of the last days is the recipient of a *divine* fluid, the Holy Spirit. Since Jesus' role as the Messiah, the "anointed one," is unique, Luke will never speak of the disciples' reception of the Spirit as an "anointing."

By means of this unique Messianic anointing, God empowers and guides Jesus to fulfill his redemptive vocation. The Spirit leads Jesus into the desert where, by means of the divine power at his disposal, the Messiah is able to thwart and repel the devil (Luke 4:1–14). Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers Jesus to execute his mission, namely, to preach the good news and to perform miracles, especially healings and exorcisms (Luke 4:14, 18; Acts 1:2; 10:38; cf. Luke 5:17; 11:20). It is therefore not surprising when Luke tells us that the Spirit inspires Jesus to utter joyful thanks to God (Luke 10:21).

In contrast to the first stage of the Spirit's activity in which the Spirit's work intersects several lives, during the pre-Pentecostal ministry of Jesus Luke never speaks of the Spirit's activity in anyone else's life (except in prospect, e.g., Luke 11:13; 12:12). For example, even though the disciples preach, heal, and exorcise during Jesus' earthly ministry (Luke 9:1–2), Luke refrains from explicitly attributing their power to the Holy Spirit. Perhaps Luke wants to concentrate all attention, without distraction, on the Spirit's activity in the person of Jesus. At any rate, this method of presentation certainly makes the outpouring of the Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost all the more novel and dramatic.

Jesus himself is aware, as was the Baptist (Luke 3:16), that such a future outpouring on the disciples will occur after his enthronement at God's right hand (cf. Acts 2:33). Thus there is a time coming, promises Jesus, when the Father will "give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13). Likewise, Jesus assures the disciples that when they are hauled before "the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities," the Holy Spirit will provide them with the words they need (Luke 12:11–12). This promise, repeatedly fulfilled in the narrative of Acts (e.g., 4:8), may help us to understand the difficult threat in the previous verse: "[E]veryone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." As Acts shows, one may go so far as to participate in the crucifixion of the Son of Man, and yet receive forgiveness after Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:23, 38). There is no hope, however, for those who steadfastly reject the words of the Holy Spirit spoken through the church, particularly its leaders (cf. Luke 12:12; Acts 3:23; 5:3, 9; 7:51).

Stage Three

After Christ is raised from the dead, he informs his apostles and their companions that what his Father long ago promised (e.g., in Joel 2:28–32; cf. Acts 2:16–21) is about to be fulfilled: they will be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:33, 49), equipping them to be witnesses of the Gospel to all the nations (Luke 24:45–49; Acts 1:4, 8; cf. Isa 44:3, 8). This empowerment occurs when, on Pentecost, the 120 or so disciples are baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5, 8; 2:4).

This powerful filling with the Spirit induces the disciples to begin praising God in previously unstudied languages that are nevertheless known by some of the Jewish pilgrims present in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. When some bystanders posit wine as the culprit for the disciples' erratic behavior, Peter divulges a radically different interpretation: the disciples' tongue-speaking—a form of prophesying (Acts 19:6)⁴—has resulted from the long-awaited fulfillment of Joel 2:28–32. In these last days, says Peter, God has poured out his Spirit, not on a select few as in the Old Testament story, but on all of his people regardless of their social station: young as well as old, slaves as well as free, and, especially, women as well as men. And, just as Joel promised, the Spirit has inspired each and every one to prophesy (Acts 2:4–18).

Peter continues his address by proclaiming the Messiahship of Jesus, especially as demonstrated by his

resurrection from the dead. But when Peter's audience shows remorse after his indictment of their participation in the killing of the Messiah, he commands repentance and baptism. Upon such a response Peter's hearers can rest assured that they will enjoy divine pardon and that they, like the 120 disciples, will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. After all, the Father's promise of the Spirit is for *everyone* whom God will call (Acts 2:22–39).

Peter's application of the Joel prophecy, along with other texts in Acts such as 5:32 and 19:1–7, underscores Luke's conviction that from Pentecost onward *every* baptized disciple receives the Holy Spirit. It is thus not surprising that thirteen texts in Acts speak of such a reception.⁵ The language used by Luke to describe this reception is remarkably rich. Take, for example, the case of Cornelius and his family. In describing their experience, Luke can say that "the Holy Spirit fell upon all" (Acts 10:44; cf. 8:16; 11:15), and that "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (cf. Acts 2:38; 8:20) was "poured out" (cf. Acts 2:17) on them (10:45; 11:17). In other words, they have "received the Holy Spirit" (10:47; cf. 2:38; 8:15, 17, 19). Finally, Peter, according to Luke, describes this event as "baptism with the Holy Spirit" (11:16; cf. 1:4), an "immersion" which was earlier experienced not only by Peter and the other apostles, but also by the six Jewish believers from Joppa who accompanied Peter to Cornelius's home (10:23, 47; 11:12) and by the Jewish believers who criticized Peter's table fellowship with Cornelius (11:2, 17–18).

All of this will mean that "baptism with the Holy Spirit" is only one of *several* expressions that denote the *single* Christian experience of receiving the Holy Spirit.⁶ This confirms that it was not merely the twelve apostles who were baptized with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, but all of the other disciples gathered with them on that historic day. After all, Jesus' promise of an imminent "clothing with power" (Luke 24:49)—baptism with the Holy Spirit, according to Acts 1:4–5, 8—was given not to the apostles alone, but to the other disciples gathered with them (Luke 24:33). Moreover, the Joel text quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17–21 twice emphasizes that the outpouring of the Spirit will enable *women* to prophesy. The careful reader of Acts will, at this point, surely think of Luke's explicit reference to the female disciples who regularly met and prayed with the apostles prior to Pentecost (Acts 1:12–14). Finally, in Acts 2:39 Peter, having just mentioned the gift of the Holy Spirit, declares that "the promise" is for all whom God calls. Surely this "promise" is nothing other than "the prom-

ise of the Father" (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4), that is to say, "baptism with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4–5).⁷

Jesus' pre-Pentecostal announcement of the coming fulfillment of "what the Father promised," namely, bap-

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tism with the Holy Spirit, had associated this with a divine empowering of the apostles to act as witnesses of the gospel events and so to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all the nations (Luke 24:45–49; Acts 1:4–5, 8). Now it is clear in Acts that the apostles function as *authoritative eyewitnesses* of Jesus (especially his resurrection) in a manner that distinguishes them from other disciples (Acts 1:21–22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39–41; 13:30–31). Yet while the apostles direct and oversee the advance of the gospel mission, the Holy Spirit empowers, sustains, and guides the disciples as a whole in their efforts to nurture the church and to evangelize Israel and the nations.

The Spirit's role in Acts as sustainer and guide of the church is played out in amazingly diverse fashion. The Spirit, for example, inspires Christian dispositions that enable those who possess them to serve the church and advance its mission: boldness in evangelistic proclamation (4:31), administrative wisdom (6:3), faith (6:5; 11:24), and joy (13:52; cf. Luke 10:21).

Often, however, the Spirit's work is more dramatic. As the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus to perform miracles and speak as a prophet (the Moses-like prophet predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15–18 [Acts 3:22–23; 7:37]), so the disciples in Acts are empowered to do the same. On the basis of texts such as Acts 10:38, we would assume that all of the disciples' miracles were performed through the Spirit's power. In some cases Luke explicitly says so. Thus Peter, as a representative of the Spirit, supernaturally discerns the sin of Ananias and Sapphira and punishes them with death (5:1–11). In like manner, Paul is filled with the Spirit and strikes Bar-Jesus with blindness (13:9–12). Especially breathtaking is the way that the Spirit, having guided Philip directly to the Ethiopian official, snatches

up the evangelist after the ensuing baptism and sets him down in the area he next needs to evangelize (8:39–40; cf. 2 Kgs 2:16).

In Acts the Spirit does indeed effect miracles, but Luke overwhelmingly associates the Spirit's post-Pentecostal work with activities that can be broadly classified as prophecy. After all, when God baptizes the disciples with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they prophesy in unknown languages (Acts 2:4–11). This is exactly what Joel (2:28–32) had predicted: God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh and enable his people to *prophesy*. "God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:11) form the *content* of the disciples' prophesying, but its very *fact* is revelatory. By this means, God's Spirit identifies the disciples of *Jesus* as the community of salvation in the last days. This provides Peter with the occasion to proclaim the risen Christ and successfully summon his hearers to enter the realm of salvation and the Spirit. Later, the Spirit incites tongue-speaking among Samaritans,⁸ Gentiles, and disciples of the Baptist in order to confirm that they, too, have been ushered into that realm (8:14–17; 10:44–48; 19:1–7). In the case of the first two groups, the Spirit's advent legitimized and further encouraged the evangelistic crossing of two especially forbidding ethnic boundaries.

In Acts, however, there are a number of instances of prophecy that do not involve tongue-speaking. When the Spirit inspires Peter and Stephen as they address their opponents (4:8; 6:10), the careful reader of Luke-Acts realizes that an earlier promise of Jesus is being fulfilled (Luke 12:11–12; 21:14–15). In some cases, the Spirit speaks *to* the prophet. Before providing gospel instruction to the Ethiopian, Philip is told by the Spirit to approach the eunuch's chariot (8:29). Later, the Spirit issues direct instructions to both Peter (10:19; 11:12) and Paul (16:6–7; 20:22–23) so that the advance of the Gospel will proceed according to the divinely ordained plan. To Stephen, the Spirit gives a visual revelation that at once vindicates him and ensures his death (7:55–56). On one occasion the Spirit instructs a church through a prophetic revelation: the Antiochene church must send Barnabas and Paul on a mission trip (13:2, 4). Lastly, the prophet Agabus twice utters predictive prophecies, one of which enables the Antiochene church to support their Judean counterparts against the ravages of famine (11:27–30) and the other of which tests Paul's resolve to return to Jerusalem (21:10–14; cf. 21:4).

Long before Luke's day, God had taken some of the Spirit that rested on Moses and put it on seventy elders

who were thus equipped to help Moses govern Israel. So endowed, they began to prophesy. When, however, Joshua learned that Eldad and Medad were also prophesying although they were not present with the seventy at the sacred tent, he urged Moses to put an end to their behavior. But Moses had a different view: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" (Num 11:29). Is it too much to suggest that, in Luke's view, what Moses longed for had become a reality in the church?

Conclusion

Through the Holy Spirit, the God portrayed in Luke-Acts leads, guides, empowers, equips, and reveals his will to his people so that they may participate in his effort to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Luke makes it abundantly clear that God did not leave the early disciples to their own devices. Jesus not only gave his disciples a holy mission to the nations, he also poured out on them the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. And this was not for private and selfish ends, but to enable them to bear faithful witness to their Lord—himself uniquely anointed with the Spirit. Has he done less for us? Surely the church today may go forward in its challenging and sometimes overwhelming mission to evangelize the nations near and far with the sure conviction that the Holy Spirit, by the various means and strategies of his own choosing, will illumine our path, lift up our drooping hands, and strengthen our weak knees.

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Notes

¹J. A. Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Tuebingen, 1742; reprint, London, 1862), 389.

²An approximate number is given since in both Luke and Acts there are a few passages in which it is unclear whether the Greek word *pneuma*, "spirit," is referring to the Holy Spirit, e.g., Luke 1:80; Acts 18:25.

³All subsequent biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

⁴Luke obviously saw tongue-speaking as a type of prophecy; otherwise, Peter's quotation of Joel 2:28–32 (in Acts 2:17–21) would not fit the Spirit-inspired behavior of the disciples. Thus when we are told that the twelve Ephesian disciples "spoke in tongues and prophesied" (Acts 19:6), we should interpret this phrase as a hendiadys (two conno-

tative words connected by a conjunction and used to express a single complex notion).

⁵1:5, 8; 2:4, 17–18, 33, 38; 5:32; 8:15–19; 9:17; 10:44–47; 11:15–16; 15:8; 19:2–6.

⁶This is not to say, of course, that the circumstances or attendant phenomena of each disciple's reception of the Spirit is alike.

⁷All these considerations make it unlikely that the antecedent of *pantes*, "all," in Acts 2:1 is "apostles" in 1:26. It is more probable that *pantes* refers to the whole group of disciples whose meeting to choose

Judas's successor is described in the last paragraph of the first chapter. The phrase *epi to auto*, "all together" (2:1), surely harks back to the same words in 1:15, where the 120 disciples are in view.

⁸Although Luke does not say that the Samaritans spoke in tongues, it is clear that something visibly dramatic occurred so that Simon Magus could "see" that they received the Holy Spirit at the laying on of Peter and John's hands (Acts 8:18). In the three other cases in Acts where Luke narrates how disciples received the Spirit, the result is tongue-speaking (2:4; 10:46; 19:6).

(Ramsaran, continuation of notes from page 28)

Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, LEC 4 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 121; see note #5 above.

⁸On a rotating basis, those who procured the provisions for the monthly meal of those voluntary societies were often given chief seats of honor and extra portions of food and wine to boot! See Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 35–40 and Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 76–87.

⁹Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke*, 911.

¹⁰Christian converts from the upper strata of Greco-Roman society would have had little, if any, concrete idea about charity. See note #5 above.

¹¹Fitzmyer (*Gospel According to Luke*, 959) notes this passage as the only place in the synoptic tradition where Jesus addresses his disciples as friends.

¹²It is possible to see Jesus' description of possible guests as a chiasmus: friends (A), brothers (B), kinsmen (B'), and rich neighbors (A'). The close bond between brothers and kinsmen is obvious. I suggest that the chiasmic structure and social convention of Greco-Roman friendship draws a tight connection between *your friends* and *rich neighbors*.

¹³The role and response of the father, of course, sets God up as the supreme friend.

¹⁴Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 129–30.

¹⁵Peter Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relations with the Corinthians*, WUNT 2.23 (Tübingen: J. C. Mohr, 1987), 35.

¹⁶For further reading and study, see Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981). On instituting conversion to a changed lifestyle from a homiletical perspective see Ronald J. Sider and Michael A. King, *Preaching About Life in a Threatening World* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).